

DELIRIUM'S JEST

(Wiseguy - Sonny/Vinnie - Story #9 in the "Pennsylvania Series")

by

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"There is the way of the Jedi...and there is the Dark Path..."

--Wookieepedia

Sonny never got sick. When he was a kid he had perfect attendance at school until he became a teenager and started ditching to be with his friends. But still, he never missed classes because of illness. Sure he had the usual childhood illnesses, but those happened when he was very young, pre-school age, and he didn't even remember them.

Once he thought he might've had a cold...in seventh or eighth grade. He thought it was cool because it made his voice grainier and he felt a bit tougher when he said "hi" every day to the older punks with cigarette packs rolled in their sleeves, the ones who hung out at the corner lot down the street from where he lived. Just because he did that, met their eyes and said hello when he passed, like they were normal kids, they always left him alone. They ridiculed other boys, taunted them. But never Sonny. He liked to think it was because he "saw" them and not because of the fact that his father worked for the mob. Still, they never asked him to join them, and in hindsight as an adult he was now pretty sure they were cool with him because of his dad. But he liked to think otherwise.

As he sat by the window wrapped in his quilted silk robe, elbow on the sill, leaning his head against his open hand, he tried to smile at the memory. He couldn't seem to hold his head up without the support. And the smile hurt his skin. In fact, he hurt everywhere on his skin. His hand was sort of shaky. And he felt like he might just float right out of the chair. He shook his head trying to get rid of the feeling. The room whirled, started to tilt. Vinnie was in front of him doing something to the bed. He looked like he was falling.

Sonny said, "Don't do that."

Vinnie tilted upright again and said without turning, "Do what?"

For a second, Sonny couldn't understand the question. Then he remembered what he'd said. *Don't fall. Don't tilt. Don't move.* "Everything."

Vinnie faced him. “Everything? You mean like breathe and eat and walk and live?”

That made no sense to Sonny. What he was thinking now was that Vinnie did so much for him. Put up with so much from him. From *him*. The guy Vinnie was supposed to despise. The one who was supposed to be his enemy. Maybe Sonny did the dishes sometimes. Maybe Sonny paid the mortgage with his Zhoratso “ill-gotten” gains. So what? It was really Vinnie who looked after everything else. And why? Even after all this time, sometimes it still made Sonny feel terribly guilty when Vinnie did so much for him. Did he deserve any of it?

Maybe Vinnie was just making up for his own conscience. Vinnie had his own guilts. He’d slept with Sonny while he was undercover. Never even managed to hint that he was a cop. That was pretty bad. Unforgivable in Sonny’s hoodlum world and, yes, it burned sometimes, though not as hot as it once had. Now Vinnie was so good to him, as if he was still trying to apologize. But Sonny just wanted to forget about that. Not feel anything. Especially not guilt for who he’d been – and yes he had been pretty fuckin’ darkside – that had actually caused Vinnie to do what he had done.

But what had Vinnie done? Back then he’d cheated. Kept secrets. Played the hood. Fucked Sonny so nice and sweet as if there wasn’t anything left hidden between them.

No, he didn’t think about that now. And Vinnie shouldn’t, either. All their secrets were out. But still Sonny said, a little clipped, a little slurred, “Quit being so nice to me!”

Vinnie said nonchalantly, “You mean I should just let you sleep in sweat-soaked sheets when you’re sick? Hey, I sleep here, too, ya know.”

Sonny frowned. That hurt his skin too. “I don’t want you doing stuff for me.”

“You don’t? You mean like make you smile?” And Vinnie was smiling. Actually smiling!

“No.”

“Well, I’m not going to do anything but put you back to bed. And maybe give you some orange juice.”

Sonny grimaced at the thought. “You keep that crap away from me.”

“It’s your favorite drink.”

Now his head started hurting. His thoughts looked like orange juice, liquid in his mind. He saw them sloshing at the walls of the bedroom, dyeing everything in neon brightness. It made him wince. In the orange waves swam little elf creatures in pinstripe suits. They had green faces and pointed ears and curl-toed shoes. Some had tiny machine guns.

They were hitting each other with them as they tried to keep from drowning in the roiling orange sea.

So, there was even a mafia in Elfland.

Little Elfland gangsters caught in a flood.

The elves faded away. Vinnie stood in front of him. “You can’t even sit without falling,” he accused. His hand was on Sonny’s shoulder. It felt really nice, that weight, that support.

“Quit,” Sonny said softly, because he badly wanted to protest something.

“Stand,” Vinnie replied, pulling him up.

Sonny leaned heavily against him and let himself be led back to bed. “There’s a mob in Elfland,” he muttered.

“What?” Vinnie’s voice sounded far away.

“Does the OCB even know?” Sonny asked. That sounded so funny he started to chuckle. But chuckling hurt. So he stopped.

Vinnie took his robe, laid it across the foot of the bed, and pulled the covers neatly over him. A hand patted his head. From a seemingly further distance, he heard Vinnie say, “Don’t worry. The OCB knows everything. Munchkins. Jedi. Klingons. Everything.”

The fresh sheets felt cool against his bare skin. Smooth. They smelled almost lemony. That was a good thing. Why did Vinnie always have to be right about everything? Clean sheets feel better when you’re sick, he’d told him, which was why Sonny had been sitting in a chair by the window in the first place while Vinnie remade the bed. And did he just say Jedi were real? Could you really just move your hand up and gesture and choke someone from a distance? That would be such a handy trick! Of course a Jedi would never do that, right?...that was Vader’s gig. But still...maybe if he’d been able to kill Patrice from six feet away, and not so up close and personal, Vinnie wouldn’t have been so shocked.

He turned onto his side and the room tilted, then settled. His eyes hurt. He closed them.

He felt a weight settle beside him at the head of the bed. Vinnie leaned over him. “Try to sleep. I’ll be back to check on you in awhile.”

Sonny muttered, “Where ya goin’?”

“Just the store. We’re out of some stuff.”

Sonny heard himself say, “Don’t,” but it sounded like he was in a long, narrow tunnel. He meant to say “don’t go” but only got out the first word.

“Don’t,” he said again as he felt the weight move off the bed. A hand touched his shoulder too briefly, was gone.

He tried to sit up, fell against his elbow. “Don’t go.” But the room was empty and careening. Then the corner punks were there, watching him. “Hi,” he said brightly, eying their grimaces but not put off at all, staring as they puffed their cigarette smoke into the air in intricate designs: dragons, castles, naked ladies. “Cool,” he said, “But I don’t smoke.”

One of the taller dark-haired punks who’d never spoken to him in all those years suddenly leaned forward and said, “We’re just pretending. We’re really cops.”

Sonny felt his heart slam suddenly in his chest. “What?”

“Yeah, and we’re after your dad.”

He closed his eyes, opened them. They were all gone but the one. Frowning, Sonny glanced at the door of the bedroom and hesitantly called out. “Vinnie!”

The one punk still in the room said, “Vinnie knows. He always has.” Then he vanished.

Shock washed over Sonny in cold/hot tremors. Sweat beaded on his forehead and slicked the flesh of his arms and sides. If he threw the covers off, despite the heater being on, the December air instantly chilled him. Pulling the covers back up made him sweat even more. So covers half on, half off, he groaned and simply stared at the empty wall until it, too, vanished. Then he was falling through blackness.

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This wasn’t sleep. This couldn’t be sleep. Because it was anything but restful.

Thrashing through darkness, he finally managed to open his eyes. His eyelids felt heavy, weighted. The bedroom came slowly into focus, dresser, chair, window, closet door, bathroom door, hall door. The bed itself felt like it was burning him. He pushed at the covers absently, legs kicking out, but comfort eluded him. He imagined there were hot coals under the bed, ash white with golden auras, and he was being slowly cooked alive. He looked down at his naked chest. He could almost see the steam rising.

He started to call for Vinnie when he saw movement at the open door to the hall. A shadow at first. Then more. A shape. A figure. A man.

Vinnie?

The figure entered the bedroom. Sonny squinted, trying to see through the haze off his cooking body.

No. Not Vinnie. This man wore glasses. And he was short. He had on a Star Wars shirt that said – no it couldn't be – **GOD HATES JEDI?** – and held a glass of orange juice in his hand.

“Frank?”

The man came up to the side of the bed and set the orange juice on the nightstand. “So,” he said coldly. “What is it? Flu?”

Sonny shook his head. The room twirled. He tried to sit up. Fell back. Where was Vinnie? He muttered, “Why are you here?”

“Vince had to go out.”

“What?”

“He asked me to keep an eye on you. Are you really that sick?”

His mind was very slow to process the words. He frowned. This couldn't be possible. Vinnie wouldn't do this to him. Send Frank to babysit? “Go away.”

Frank crossed his arms over his chest, sighed. “No can do.”

Sonny closed his eyes hoping that might do the trick. “Don't need a babysitter,” he muttered.

When he opened his eyes, though, Frank was still there. But now he was sitting in a chair. The chair looked like one of the chairs from the dining room downstairs. Frank leaned back, crossed his legs, and picked up a paper. Face and upper body obscured now, he was silent.

Sonny stared at the front of the paper. The thick, dark headline blurred. Some words stood out, though. **DECEPTION. DISHONESTY. TRAP.**

He squinted, trying to see better. “What's that?” he finally asked.

“Nothing you would ever worry about,” Frank replied from behind the paper.

“But the news, that headline...”

Frank bent the paper and peered at him. “Same old story. People try to take something that isn't theirs. People get hurt.”

Sonny frowned, trying to remember if he'd even read the paper that morning. Probably not. He'd been sick most of the day. Then he realized what Frank was saying. Was that a personal jab? "Same old story..." he echoed, frowning.

"Yeah, don't you have it memorized by now?"

Sonny jerked back, glaring, but Frank just stared at him over the folds of the paper, not moving. The room spun a little, then settled down again. He reached up to rub his forehead but missed and hit his own nose. His arm and hand felt like boneless rubber. He threw his hand back on the pillow and let it rest. It was then he realized his covers were very askew. They were tossed back to the waist. One leg rested on top of the bedspread. It felt chilled but other parts of him were so hot. He shivered violently.

Frank did not seem to notice at all. This unnerved Sonny, and he tried to sit up again, falling back before he rose even an inch. "Where's Vinnie?"

"I told you. Out."

Frustrated with that answer, Sonny tried closing his eyes again, but the dizziness came back, making him nauseous. He opened them. Stared at the white, stark ceiling. The ceiling fan and light rocked back and forth. The room swayed.

"When's he coming back?" He tried to keep the quaver from his voice. He did not feel at all well, and he didn't want Frank to know it.

"Who knows?"

"But...he didn't say...?"

"No, he didn't say." And it sounded like Frank was mimicking his tone. "Hey, you want to read this?" He held out the paper. "That story about the guy who takes over, takes everything from his people, bullies them, screws them real good, hires lawyers and accountants and telepaths to cover it all up, hide all that scum and villainy. How do ya do something like that? You know the ropes. How'd he do it?"

Sonny could barely follow what he was saying. What lawyers? What *telepaths*?

"I'll bet you even know some of them. It's a small world...after all."

"Know some of who?" Sonny asked.

"Well, you should know. There're people who will do anything if you pay them enough, right?"

Was this a trick question? Sonny tried to nod, but the room shook. His head felt like it was flying off his spinal chord.

“Yeah.” Frank’s tone was colder now, causing Sonny to automatically look at him again. The man was looking downright pissed. “Yeah, you know that story well, don’t you? The hero and the rogue.”

“Huh?” Now the room really tilted. Back and forth. Sonny winced.

“Taking things. Hurting people. Just waiting for the next opportunity...”

“I don’t...” Sonny couldn’t think. The words were slurred in his brain and in his mouth. *Go away*, he thought. He tried to say it but the words stuck in his throat.

He lifted his hand. It felt light and airy. Even though he knew Vinnie would disapprove, he made a lazy slicing gesture toward Frank’s throat. Nothing happened.

As Sonny watched, the paper lifted, obscuring Frank again. The headline burned. **DECEPTION**, it said. **DENIAL**. The letters scrambled, spelling **DEAD** and **END**. He turned away, tried to roll onto his side. He was cold and shivering but wherever the covers touched him burned. He closed his eyes. Felt himself drift for awhile. He thought about Vinnie. When was he coming back? He thought about how improbable all this was. Him moving in with him. Living in a house that looked like a cake. Vinnie quitting his job. Not speaking to his family. Sonny losing everything because of this sting operation, this crazy fucked up world, the lies. Him and Vinnie fucking around as if they didn’t have a care when really the sky was falling and everyone was in on it including Vinnie and Sonny just should’ve gone and quit while he was ahead.

What did any of it mean anyway? Nothing. He’d long ago concluded no one had a soul. There was no such thing. People pretended to have hearts, but really they were only organs made of blood and muscle, machines meant to perpetuate lives of no meaning.

But people loved to play their false games, loved to pretend to be important, to try to tell other people how to think, live, be. Sonny never did any of that, except maybe pretending to be important. But he never tried to tell other people how to live. He knew they were nobody anyway, and none of them cared about him so why should he care about telling them how to be? It meant nothing. All of it. And who were these self-righteous cops anyway trying to take him down, trying to stop him? Did they think they were better? More pure? Right?

A voice interrupted his equivocations. “Nothing changes. People don’t change. They can’t, you know. It’s out of their power.”

Sonny opened his eyes. Frank was staring at him again through those thick, round glasses, through heat waves that seemed to fill the room. The paper was gone. Frank had no expression at all. But he watched Sonny intently and Sonny didn’t like it. He squirmed, kicked at his covers.

“You’re a thug. You know you’re a thug.”

“Why are you saying this?”

“Because you’ll always be a thug.”

“And what you do isn’t bullying?” Sonny asked, surprised his voice came out as clearly as it did.

“I only bully those who deserve it,” Frank said.

There was an outline around Frank of blue fire. It morphed and quivered like some halo gone bad. An electrical anomaly. An energetic breach. The Force. It kept snapping at Sonny, like it was reaching out to him, to touch him, to zap him. Frank seemed not to notice.

Sonny scooted more toward the bed’s center. Again he tried to sit up, but couldn’t find the strength.

Frank said, “Yeah, control, change, it’s all an illusion. Nothing ever really changes. We just think it does because we like to tell ourselves we make a difference. But you know better, don’t you?”

He glanced back at the ceiling. Something inside him stabbed. The punks on the corner heckled his friends. But not Sonny. Sonny felt vindicated by that. Like he’d done something right, better than the others. But really, they were afraid of Sonny, of Sonny’s father. That was all. Sonny was not better. They didn’t like him anymore than they liked his friends. He had no control over the situation. Not one bit.

And that hurt, too, because Sonny thought they were so cool.

But if they saw him now? He’d be dead. Worse than dead. They’d beat him to a pulpy mass, leaving him choking on his own blood. Drowning. Retching. Suffering for what he was now. What he was doing. Living with a man. Loving a man.

That could not be tolerated. There was no place for him. Not in his world. Not in any world he even knew how to inhabit.

Everything was wrong for Sonny, always had been. His father. His neighborhood. His deepest feelings of longing for someone, anyone he might share a single real, pure feeling with. How could that exist in the world that taught him? Women were for taking. Men were for fighting. Women were for making babies. Men were for carousing. None of that involved any real thinking. Or any real heart.

So what do you do? You bury your heart. Deep. In the mud and the rain and the beer and the blood. You don’t think about it. What you do think about is how sharp the world

is, and if you want to survive you better sharpen yourself even more. Take it on and win. What could be better vengeance than coming out on top, ahead of them all, and smiling at the growing piles of your winnings?

“You’re only gonna hurt him in the end,” Frank said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Sonny wanted to argue. “I wouldn’t hurt Vinnie.” But that sounded so lame. Still, Frank heard him.

“You did hurt him. You wanted him dead. Of course you did. Of course. Blaming him for your sins. It’s easier that way. Then do away with him. That’s what you wanted. But when he wouldn’t go down so easily, you tried to take the other easy way. You tried to...”

“Shut up,” Sonny choked out. “Shut up!” Now he managed to find his voice, to yell.

“Winning is so important that you’d kill yourself to accomplish that.”

“Fuck you.”

“What do you think *that* did to Vince?”

“Fuck you!” Sonny struggled to rise. “What the fuck are you doing here anyway?”

Frank did not respond.

“Where is he?”

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Frank asked.

The sudden flare of anger on top of more anger nearly strangled him. “Get out of here!”

“Maybe that would be best, that Vince doesn’t come back. Think about it. You’re not good enough for him. You’re only going to hurt him.”

The room careened like some cheap carnival ride. Sonny wanted to get up, throttle Frank. He kept struggling with his uncooperative body, with the now tangled covers, with a heat that seemed to seep into him and push him down, like a mysterious, invisible pressure was on top of him.

Frank said, “If you were at all noble, if there was any change in you worth noting, you’d leave him anyway. Because you can’t be for him what he deserves. It’s in the blood. The lousy street hood. You’re just a plain, every day thug. You can’t change. It’s who you are.”

The weight pressed harder. Sonny couldn't move. He could only struggle to make himself heard. "I'm not..."

"You're bad for him. Admit it."

"It's not like that..."

"Admit it."

Sonny blinked. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be lying here helpless like this with Frank just saying these things. Why now? Why of all the times they had talked was Frank doing this now? He couldn't even function, and hell it would've only been fair to do this when Sonny might have some strength to take a swing at him.

He mumbled, "You don't even know..."

"Know what? Everything's a lark for you. Right? Nothing is real. Nothing has any substance in your life, Steelgrave!"

"But Vinnie is..."

"What?" Frank interrupted. "Special? Different? Yeah. He is. That's why I'm saying these things to you. Because he is special. And he deserves better. A lot better than you!"

"Fuck you for saying that!"

"I speak the facts. And the fact is you know I'm not lying. You know deep down inside yourself that you're no good. You've always known it. It's why you made the choices you did in life. Why you got caught. And why you deserved more than eight months in prison. Not this holiday. Not this pretty world Vince engineered for you out of his misplaced guilt in his part of the scheme that took you down."

Sonny blinked harder, but the room kept undulating, like it was alive and breathing. Frank's blue halo snapped like alien lightning, fizzing the air around him. He heard his own heart beating so hard it was as if the whole world was exploding over and over and he couldn't do a thing about it. Boom. Boom. Boom.

Sonny's strangled words pushed through his throat. "It's not like that! You've talked to Vinnie. You know him!"

"I know what he believes. And I know what's true. What's true is you are bad for him. All this is only gonna hurt him. It's no good. What Vince believes in the face of that reality is of no consequence. You should never have come here."

Every word Frank said now stung him like barbs. The blue flames stretched out, almost touching him. He tried to hunch away. He closed his eyes. “Not true...,” he whispered.

“You should be dead,” Frank said, almost sighing.

And then Sonny felt it, the electrical surge, the blue flame. He’d tried to electrocute himself once. He didn’t remember it. But now the buzzing was all around him. It was better this way. Better. He was worth nothing now. He shouldn’t be able to hurt anyone anymore.

A thick darkness framed his vision and he felt himself sinking into it.

But then he saw Vinnie’s face floating in front of him, that devoted look that drew Sonny, those sweet blue eyes. He remembered Vinnie saying once, *You can throw mud on anything*. And he could. He twisted things up in his mind, made them worst case scenarios. It was the only way to survive in a world that backstabbed everybody and everything.

He remembered telling Vinnie, *Power changes people*. Did that mean losing power could change people, too?

The darkness receded bit by bit. And Vinnie touched him, one hand on either side of his face, and said softly, “I won’t let you go.”

Sonny gasped, locked onto that beautiful face. “I’m not good enough...”

Vinnie smiled. “Not better, not worse, just you. That’s all I want.”

“But Frank...”

Vinnie said quietly, “Frank doesn’t lie. But Frank also doesn’t know the truth. Does he?”

“About me...,” Sonny tried to explain.

Vinnie shook his head. “No. About us.”

Shakily, Sonny confessed, “But I’ll only hurt you. People can’t change. People can’t change. People can’t...”

The room whirled around him. Sonny grabbed the covers with his fists. The bed shook. He hung on tight as white walls, white ceiling, doors, windows, everything moved around and around him like the fucking Wizard of Oz. It seemed to go on forever. He called out. “Vinnie!”

The room whirled and shook. He cried out again. Twice more. Deep. Guttural. Vinnie's name.

The third time he yelled everything stopped. The world went silent. A hand pressed cool against his forehead. A smooth voice said, "I'm here."

Sonny realized he was trying to catch his breath. He reached out and grabbed something solid. An arm. He opened his eyes. Vinnie was sitting on the edge of the bed. He was murmuring, "Shh. Shh. You're burning up."

Sonny glanced around desperately. "Where's Frank?"

"Frank?"

"Why'd you bring him here? Why? You left. And he was so fucking mean to me!"

Vinnie smiled, then laughed very softly. "Hell, you really are sick. Frank was never here."

"But he was right there." Sonny looked. There was no dining room chair. Nothing between him and the big fluffy chair by the window.

"No. I've been gone about twenty minutes, that's all. And Frank is in New Jersey."

"But he said...he said...I...I'm...bad."

Vinnie gave an exaggerated frown, said sarcastically, "Who? You?" It was obvious he was trying hard not to grin.

"It's not funny. I'm no good for you."

"Frank would *never* say that!" Then he laughed lightly again. "Not even if he believed it."

"But...but..."

"Sonny, you have a fever. It's not real."

He tried to take that in. Not real. Like the Jedi. Or the human heart... But he could only find the strength to grumble, "And after I bought him a steak for his birthday and everything!"

Vinnie grinned. "Yeah, so how much sense does that make? I'm gone to the store and he comes in and starts beating on you?"

Sonny didn't think it was very funny. "It was so real," he whispered in amazement.

Suddenly, Vinnie made a face. “We’ve lived together for six months. It’s been fan-fucking-tastic. Why in hell would you think you’re not good for me?”

Sonny swallowed, watching the play of confusion, then affection move over Vinnie’s gorgeous face. He didn’t feel well at all, but that face...that face.... He grabbed Vinnie’s arm in a harder grip. Vinnie did everything for him. Even now, he’d gone to the store. There were packages of things on the bed, things Sonny couldn’t see. “You do so much for me. After everything I’ve been, how do I fucking deserve you?”

“Because, you stupid bastard,” --but the tone wasn’t harsh, it was sweet, almost seductive-- “after everything I’ve been through, I deserve something in my life that I want and not what someone else wants for me or tells me I’m supposed to want. And I choose you.”

Sonny felt completely speechless.

“Clear enough?” Vinnie asked. “It’s really that simple.”

Sonny chewed hard on his lower lip. Looked away.

“Come on,” Vinnie said, pushing one arm behind him and pulling him up. “Sit up. I got aspirin. I got fever reducer. I got juice. And food if you want it.” His free hand grabbed a pillow and put it behind Sonny.

Sonny felt himself pulled forward and let himself fall. The side of his face pressed Vinnie’s chest. He held his breath. He listened. And he heard it. The beat. The drum. The heart.

It was so real.

“Hey,” Vinnie said above him.

Sonny leaned harder against him. The beat thrummed on as the punks watched from across the room. Sonny did not say “hi” to them this time. He just glared as one by one they vanished like ghosts blown away by the wind. The last one had the face of Frank, and the round, shining glasses. Frank’s head tilted. He glanced up. And disintegrated.

Pow, pow...you’re gone!

“Hey,” Vinnie said again.

But Sonny kept leaning against him and didn’t move. He closed his eyes. Listened to the beat. It was real. Something in him had changed. He could feel it. And he knew he had found the better way out.